

until we reached the end. We didn't really work from an outline or any kind of intensive plotting. It was written as three novellas, which we then assembled: 'Storms of Windhaven' was first."

This is pretty old stuff, however. More recently: "I'm working on a new novel, and I'm continually working on *Wild Cards*. In addition to editing the *Wild Cards* books I also write a fairly substantial amount."

*Wild Cards* is a superheroic shared-world series that has gone on to spread into other forms: "The books are still the primary thing. Though there's a comic, a game and there's about to be a movie, those are all deriving from the books. The books now have nine volumes out. We've got two novels and one more anthology in the pipeline, and we're negotiating for more."

Of course, superheroes are primarily a comics phenomenon, so it may seem perverse to try to do them in prose: "I love comics. I've always loved comics. I started reading with comics. If it hadn't been for comics, God knows what would have happened to me, because they were certainly a lot more fun to read than the stuff they gave you in school. So I'd always had a sneaking desire to write comics or to write about those kinds of issues. A number of people involved in *Wild Cards* come out of the same kind of story. They're people who always loved the old heroes, the comics heroes, and had a secret – or not so secret – desire to do their own versions."

"The immediate cause of it was actually a game. A lot of the Albuquerque and New Mexico writers – that's where I live presently, in Santa Fe, New Mexico – were gamers, and they started up a role-playing game. Some of them invented characters for it, and it was a lot of fun. And being writers, they put an enormous amount of work into these characters. It seemed a shame just to waste them like that. So the notion for *Wild Cards* was born out of that, but quickly transcended it, I think. I know there's a lot of stuff today that's 'game fiction,' where people play D&D and then write up the results. I think that usually produces pretty horrible fiction. Some people might say the same of *Wild Cards*, but you know we certainly tried to grow beyond our origins. The game that we once played many years ago bears little resemblance to the stories that have actually come out, although some of the characters are the same."

"Also, in some ways *Wild Cards* is almost a reply to comic books. Comic books have their own conventions which have been established a long time, and are fun, and people take them seriously; but we wanted to do it a little more gritty, and a little more realistic, and say, 'Well, what would the world really be like if people had

these outlandish powers and so forth? How would it change people's lives, and how would it change history?' The *Wild Cards* books are the result."

So why didn't Martin – and friends – do *Wild Cards* as a comic? "I wasn't a comics writer. Neither were the other people. Stuff I wanted to do as a comic has been done to death in comics. The interest was to do something new: was to do it in prose. To my mind prose is a better medium than comic books. I mean, I enjoyed comics, and they're OK for fun. But for a writer, particularly, in comics you are so dependent on the artist. In prose, the writer is his own artist. You can really do what you want. You can draw the character without being able to draw, and you can achieve a depth of internal characterization that is very hard to do in comic books."

Shared worlds, of course, pose particular editorial problems in terms of continuity and maintaining the original focus of the work: "It's certainly a lot of work, but I've been so immersed in it that I don't think keeping control of the continuity has been particularly difficult."

"When I first started doing *Wild Cards*, right in the beginning, we started with the Albuquerque people who had been involved in that game; but then, that's only a very small group of writers. I wanted more contributors, so I wrote letters to a number of writers who I knew loved comic books or loved the old pulp heroes, and that's how I got the Austin crowd like Howard Waldrop and Lew Shiner and Roger Zelazny and people like that. But I invited a lot of people who never contributed to the book."

"When we were soliciting for characters we got a lot of kind of silly, goofy powers, even from some of the people who later contributed serious characters to the anthology: their first impulse was to do something silly. I don't know if this was just because the idea sounded silly first off the bat. To my mind it's only a defensiveness, you know: 'Ahh, I'm a serious writer and this is a goofy comic-book idea, I'd better not take it seriously. I'd better make fun of it.' But there's certainly fun to be had in some of these concepts. We've had some ourselves in the *Wild Cards* books."

"I weeded out a lot of the really silly stuff right at the beginning. We had fun with it, but that wasn't what we were going for. I didn't mind having some wit, but I didn't want the kind of thing that, essentially said, 'Well the whole premise is ridiculous,' because we didn't think the premise was ridiculous. I mean, it's a perfectly science-fictional kind of theme, the superman theme: what would happen if people did have these powers. The nature of the powers is not important."

"Now, what's true is that over nine volumes – and a number of fans have commented on this to me – *Wild Cards* has got darker. I don't think it ever was silly. I mean, there were silly moments, there were silly stories, there were silly characters, but the overall tone was fairly serious. As it's gone on, it's gotten to the point where maybe it's a little more than serious, maybe it is dark in certain aspects. Why has that happened? It's certainly not a deliberate thing, that I've sat down as editor and said, 'let's write a bunch of dark, grim, gloomy stories.' It may just be that as we explore the world more and more, and as we extrapolate what we think would really happen, it's not possible to be as sunny as the comic books. I think that the conclusion that a lot of writers are reaching independently, and the conclusion we are reaching collectively in the *Wild Cards* books, is that if there were super-powered people among us, they could have a pretty rough time of it, because the world is not necessarily going to hail them as heroes, no matter what kind of funny suits they might wear or what colourful names they take. And that adds a certain tension to the series, at the point it's reached now: you know, the impulse between hero-worship and fear, and the line between them is very thin."

One of the basic differences between comics and science fiction is sense of wonder. In comics, almost anything can happen, and probably will. Grafted on to everyday America you get all kinds of alien races wandering around with no one batting an eyelid, dead characters rising up a few issues down the line because particular creators always wanted to work with them, and feats of super-science bordering on the miraculous that make no impact whatsoever on the life of Joe Public. This is not an element that *Wild Cards* has chosen to incorporate. "We tend not to do that. I mean, the whole basis of *Wild Cards* has been more to realism than comic books. It is always amusing if you can take a character who people think is dead and somehow bring him back, but you have to play within the rules while you do that – and I think that a lot of comics, particularly in longer running series, don't play within the rules. They cheat. Most of our people who die stay pretty dead. And death can happen to anyone in the world. One of the benefits of the shared-world form is that no one is safe. You can't say so and so's the hero and he's going to be around for the whole series."

Another advantage is having other people's characters to work with: "Most people tend to write from the viewpoint of their own character, but they do heavily use other people's characters in secondary or antagonist

## No Better Than Anyone Else

### Molly Brown

**I**t was a Friday night and I was part of a team working the booth joints in the West sector of Area 4. Another team was working the East. There'd been seven booth-related murders in the last four months; all dark-skinned women in their twenties, with shoulder length black hair, all known prostitutes, all mutilated. Two were black, one was oriental. The rest were Latino: three Puerto Ricans, one Mexican. I'd never done plain clothes before; I'd only been out of the academy three weeks. But I was twenty-two years old, and despite my blue-eyed Irish mother, I looked more like my Puerto Rican father. So I was assigned to Bruce Woods' team as a decoy.

My partner was Castilla Mae Jones, a six-foot-tall black chick with a red and green dragon tattooed on her right thigh. She wore a leopard-print leotard and ballet shoes; I wore a red rubber strapless dress. It was a bad choice, so tight I could hardly move and hot as hell. We each wore a single silver earring, which was actually a microphone. And of course we wore rubber gloves – Area 4 was a disease zone. Nobody went to Area 4 unless they were already infected, crazy, suicidal... or a cop.

I'd heard some of the uniform guys back at the station, saying why risk good cop lives over a bunch of broads who'd probably have been dead in a year or two anyway. But murder's still murder, isn't it? And you can't just ignore it, no matter who the victim was or how long she might have lived anyway. Doesn't matter if she wouldn't have lasted another year or even a week, she still had the right to that week. And I told them it was our job to get the bastard who'd stolen that week, or that day, or even that hour she might have had left. And they just said you're a fucking idealist, Gonzales, and nobody stays an idealist long on this job.

Bruce decided we'd hit this joint called Ricky's *Dating Game Lounge* first. It was eleven o'clock. There were maybe half-a-dozen people in the whole place, counting us and the bartender. We were the only women. All the booth joints were dumps, but this was a worse dump than most. It was just a long narrow room with a couple of tables and a bar, dark and smelling of stale beer and smoke. The mirror behind the bar was cracked. There was a black imitation-velvet curtain drawn across one corner at the back, next to the ladies' room. That's where the booth was. In the other back corner there was a jukebox and a tiny stage where the bartender told us they were supposed to

have a dancer. It didn't look like the dancer was going to show. Frankie O'Hara, our back-up, had gone in a few minutes ahead of us. He was sitting at the bar ignoring us, just like he'd ignored me back at the station. I didn't like the guy; on the way over, he'd rolled his eyes every time I opened my mouth. He was wired, too. A little microphone next to his chest.

Bruce stayed outside in an unmarked car, watching the front entrance and monitoring all three of us; he was supposed to come in if he heard anything suspicious, like gunshots or screaming, as if he really thought screaming would be something unusual in a place like Ricky's. O'Hara said the reason Bruce stayed in the car was he was scared of infection – if he got out of the car at all, he'd be wearing a surgical mask. Looking around Ricky's, I wished I'd worn a mask myself, even though they said you couldn't get infected through the air.

Castilla had been a bit stand-offish back at the station. Bruce told me she'd told him no way was she gonna get stuck looking after some goddammed rookie who didn't know her ass from a hole in the ground. She wanted to work with Chrissie Lopez, but Chrissie got assigned to the other team. Castilla was stuck with me, and anyone could see she wasn't happy about it. But once we were hanging around Ricky's with nothing happening and nothing to do but talk, she started to get a bit friendlier. Especially after I told her I'd been with Dilation and Curettage.

It wasn't like I was bragging, it just slipped out. We'd given our glasses to the bartender to be filled and sterilized. He'd placed them back on the bar, using a pair of metal tongs, and handed us each an individually wrapped straw. Ordinarily, that should have been precautions enough, but I didn't like the look of the bartender – even in the dim light of Ricky's, I could see the guy had a pasty face and huge dark circles beneath his eyes. Of course, he might have just been tired, but I wasn't taking any chances; there was no way I was drinking anything poured by that guy, even through a sterile straw. We took our drinks and went to stand at the back of the room. I noticed Castilla wasn't drinking hers either.

**S**he was leaning against the jukebox, smoking a cigar, when I noticed the box had one of the old Dilation tunes: "Cut Me, Baby." You know it. It's the one with the chorus that goes: Cut me, squeeze my veins dry, let me die in your arms, let me